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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV

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SUBJECT: CORRESPONDENCE FROM GVN'S COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

1. Embassy received October 4 identical letters from the Government of Vietnam's Commission on Religious Affairs addressed to the "Department of State," DRL/IRF Ambassador Hanford and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Embassy pouched the letters to EAP/BCLTV, Registration #4047329. Text of letter follows below:

2. Begin text of letter:

To:
U.S. Department of State
2201 C. Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

We have learnt that in the annual report on international religious freedom released on September 15th 2004, the U.S. Department of State designated Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern. The Government Commission on Religious Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, strongly protests against the aforesaid wrongful decision. This decision does not help the cooperative relations between Vietnam and the United States, particularly at a time when the bilateral relations are considered promising and our two countries are preparing for the tenth Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The annual report of the Department of State is not objective and seeks to impose its view on Vietnam. It intentionally ignores Vietnam's policy and law which guarantees the peoples' right to freedom of belief and religion in the renovation process. In addition, it fails to update intense religious activities of millions of believers and thousands of clergymen and religious dignitaries in Vietnam. The report, prepared on the basis of one-sided and anti-Vietnam information provided by extremist elements who abuse religious freedom for political purposes, outrageously distorts the religious policies and practices in Vietnam.

The imposition of view, in the name of religious freedom, of one country on another is unacceptable.

The State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam consistently pursues the policy of respecting its citizens' right to freedom of belief and religion, to follow or not to follow any religion. All religions are equal before the law; no discrimination by reasons of belief or religion, no infringement upon the right to freedom of belief and religion of citizens are permitted. At the same time, it is not allowed to abuse the freedom of belief and religion in violation of the law. In Vietnam, there is no arrest for "religious reason"; neither does there exist any State document that favors "forced renunciation of faith" as mentioned in the report.

In certain localities, for reasons of social security and territorial integrity, the government had to handle some cases of law violations by several extremists. However, this is not the issue of religion but the political and security concern that any country must deal with in the same way.

A number of U.S. Senators, Congressmen, international delegations, diplomatic missions, representatives of European Union, United Nations and Vietnam-based international press, who have visited the Central Highlands and met with local authorities, religious representatives and local people, could have found no evidence to prove that the Vietnamese Government represses Protestant believers.

The consistent policy of the State of Vietnam is to consolidate the national unity, to improve material and spiritual life of its citizens, including religious believers. This policy is widely recognized by the international community.

In the process of international integration, Vietnam is improving its legislation in conformity with international law in every aspect, including faith and religion. With the aim of furthering the right to freedom of belief and religion, the Viet Nam Standing Committee of the National Assembly approved on June 18, 2004 the Ordinance on Belief and Religion. The Ordinance institutionalizes the

guidelines and policies of the State of Vietnam on faith and religion, thus creating a legal basis to guarantee the religious freedom in practice and improving the effectiveness of the Government's management in this area. This is a strong evidence to prove that the State of Vietnam attaches great importance to religious freedom and always respects this right in practice, the fact that has been reconfirmed by Vietnam's adherence to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights since 1982.

We are convinced that the U.S. Department of State is aware of the importance of building a stable and long-term Vietnam-U.S. relationship in the interests of the two countries and the region. Any obstacle to this positive trend is unacceptable.

On the other hand, we would like to reaffirm that we are eager to promote dialogues between religious organizations of Vietnam and the United States for our better mutual understanding.

In the spirit, we would like to urge the U.S. Department of State to reconsider the wrongful decision to designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern, in the long-term interest of our two peoples and for the sake of peace, cooperation and development in the world as a whole.

Best regards,

NGO YEN THI
Chairman of the Government Commission on Religious Affairs
Socialist Republic of Vietnam

End text of letter.

#Marine